

KEY FINDINGS ON ELECTION VIOLENCE PREVENTION:

Bangladesh: January 2014 Election



Targeted peacebuilding efforts are frequently used to prevent election violence (PEV). Practitioners possess a variety of programming options or interventions, including peace messaging campaigns, preventive diplomacy, dedicated youth programs, or monitoring missions. The choice among preventive measures is often made intuitively or impulsively, rather than based on empirical evidence, risk assessments, or thorough practice evaluations. USIP recently concluded an ambitious study to assess whether prevalent intervention models demonstrate a measurable impact on electoral violence levels. Bangladesh was the most violent election examined in this study, and presents a compelling case for the use of election violence prevention tools to mitigate violence.

Bangladesh's current democratic era has been marked by violence, successive political crises, and turbulent elections. The January 2014 election was the most violent in the country's history. The opposition political party and its allies boycotted the poll, which they enforced with beatings, murders, and Molotov cocktails hurled at buses—incinerating those inside. The ruling party responded to the unrest through the partisan army and police, which often indiscriminately fired into crowds of protesters. At least 400 were killed, including voters, party activists, election officials, and security personnel, in the months before, during, and weeks after the election. Election-related violence was far more severe than in previous parliamentary contests.

Political violence is not a new phenomenon in Bangladesh. Assassinations, coups, riots, intimidation, harassment, and corruption pervade the country's politics. Important contextual vulnerabilities like power centralization and social division contribute to the risk of election-related violence, but the 2014 election was unique both in violence levels and prevention weakness.

The violence and tension far predated the official electoral cycle. A series of controversial decisions by the ruling Awami League since its win in 2008 provoked a slow escalation of violence. Yet despite these concerns, Bangladesh's election violence could have been mitigated or even prevented.

Bangladesh's historically high election violence levels are explained by two factors: first, the actions of the Awami League, which aggressively sought to consolidate its power and provoked a violent backlash from opposition parties; and second, the poor implementation of prevalent election violence prevention models, which were weaker than in past elections. Although deficient violence-prevention tools cannot solely explain Bangladesh's increased election violence, their weakness facilitated, and in some cases, even exacerbated tension and violent conflict.



CONTEXTUAL VULNERABILITIES

Contextual vulnerabilities are potential social, political, or economic drivers of election violence that shape the environment in which prevention efforts operate. They offer possible alternative explanations for the presence or absence of violence as well as conditions prevention programming must overcome. Bangladesh's most significant contextual risk factors for election violence are structural: power centralization and religious division. Constitutionally, Bangladesh has a highly centralized political

PREVENTION MODEL & ELECTION VIOLENCE CODING, BANGLADESH CASE ANALYSIS

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	PEV MODEL	SECURITY SECTOR ENGAGEMENT	ELECTION MGMT. & ADMINISTRATION	PREVENTIVE DIPLOMACY	PEACE MESSAGING	CIVIC & VOTER EDUCATION	MONITORING & MAPPING	VOTER CONSULTATIONS	YOUTH PROGRAMMING	ELECTION VIOLENCE (DV)
CODING	.25	.25	1.0	.25	.25	.25	.25	.25	.25	1.0

system (First-Past-The-Post) that rewards winners with access to virtually complete power while entirely excluding losers. Demographically, the political importance of the Hindu minority (9% of population) is controversial in an increasingly conservative Islamic-majority country. Politically, Hindus gravitate toward the secular Awami League, making them a target for opposition parties. Both of these factors contribute to and shape the risk environment for electoral violence in Bangladesh.

PREVENTION TOOLS

- The election commission and security forces were co-opted by the ruling party;
- Election monitoring and mapping was unsystematic; and
- Voter-targeted programs—such as peace messaging, civic and voter education, voter consultations, and youth programming—were weak or effectively nonexistent.

Overall, many of the most common prevention instruments in conflict-prone democracies were generally weak or absent in Bangladesh's 2014 election cycle (see Table above). The most institutionalized domestic prevention tool was election management and administration, which still received a lackluster coding score of .25 because of partisanship and incompetence. The strongest PEV tool overall was preventive diplomacy, as the international community took a keen interest in resolving Bangladesh's political conflict through diplomatic means. However, its prominent role (a coding score of 1) is indicative of Bangladesh's weak domestic PEV models and the consequent collapse into widespread violence. No other prevention tool received a score over .25 during the election.

These consistently low scores are in part unique to the 2014 election cycle, which was boycotted not only by opposition parties but also many peacebuilding practitioners and diplomats, who refused to legitimize the process with their participation. Some previously

strong prevention models, such as election monitoring, were substandard in 2014. Consequently, the country's previously deficient PEV tools were effectively abandoned.

In sum, the weakness or absence of prevention programming correlated with the expected outcome: high levels of violence. This offers support for the importance of preventive action. Furthermore, historical variation also confirms the correlation, with historically weak PEV tools corresponding with high violence. None of this is conclusive evidence that stronger engagement would have prevented violence. However, coupling a nonpartisan and effective election commission and security sector with expanded election monitoring would likely have had important mitigating effects. With these core tools strengthened, adding substantive peace messaging, civic and voter education, voter consultations, and youth programming could then have made a marginal, but important, contribution to peace. The most deadly election in Bangladesh's history was therefore created by the confluence of two factors: an extraordinary level of antagonism between the two primary parties coupled with the historically weak implementation of PEV tools.

ABOUT THE CENTER

Through evaluative research and field experiments, USIP's Center for Applied Research on Conflict (ARC) will continue to facilitate the transition from intuitive programming towards sustained election support grounded on empirical research and rigorously evaluated for impact.

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